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ABSTRACT

In Australia, the institutions of marriage and family are changing as reflected by the statistics on separation, divorce, and remarriage. Recent figures reveal an increase in divorce in the earlier years of marriage as well as a dramatic increase in the number of remarriages occuring across all age groups. Under the Family Law Act the government provides funding for marriage counseling organizations. Most of the centers operated by these organizations rely on trained lay counselor volunteers supervised by professionals. Approximately 74% of the Australian population has access to approved agencies. Less formal sources of counseling include friends, physicians, social workers, nurses, and lawyers. The average client is an Australian-born urban couple who have been married less than 10 years with no more than two children. Their presenting problems include lack of communication, sexual dissatisfaction, and disenchanted wife issues. Assessing the effects of various therapeutic intervention techniques is still problematic and enormous gaps of data exist on many aspects of marriage counseling in Australia. (RC)

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WORKING PAPER

Marriage Counselling in Australia

A Review

by Ilene Wolcott

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The purpose of this paper is to present an overview of marriage counselling services in Australia with a focus mainly on information obtained from marriage counselling organisations approved under the *Family Law Act*. A brief review of recent trends in marriage, divorce and remarriage is included to place the subject of marriage counselling in a more relevant context.

In Australia, as in other industrialised societies, the institutions of marriage and family are undergoing modification in response to changing personal, social and economic attitudes and values as reflected in the statistics on separation, divorce and remarriage. The contributory influence and impact on marital trends of women's changing roles and expectations evidenced by their increase in workforce participation, the decline in fertility rates due to availability of effective contraception, and the increase in longevity for both men and women have been well documented (Jupp 1980, Knox 1980, Edgar 1980).

Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage

The *Family Law Act* of 1975, sets the sole ground of divorce to be irretrievable breakdown of marriage after twelve months of separation. While it has been accused of contributing to and encouraging marital breakdown, and an upward trend in divorce rates is discernible since the late 1960s, the dramatic rise in marriage dissolution in 1976, the year the Act was implemented, can be attributed more to the backlog of cases that were waiting for the law to materialise than to any sudden shift in values about marriage (McDonald 1980). This steady increase is shown in Table 1.

Recent figures reveal an increase in divorce in the earlier years of marriage. In 1979, twenty per cent of all marriages dissolved were of less than five years duration compared to seventeen per cent in 1977 and fifteen per cent in 1976 (ABS 1980b).

Prior to the enactment of the *Family Law Act* when divorce was more difficult to obtain, 9.3 per cent of all divorces in 1971 and 7.9 per cent in 1966 were granted within the first five years of marriage (ABS 1978). This trend toward divorce in the earlier years of marriage can also be observed by comparing the figures for all divorces with the proportion of total marriages performed in a given year. Of all the marriages performed in 1966, 1.5 per cent resulted in divorce within five years, 1.8 per cent in 1970-71, and by 1974-75, this number had reached 6.6 per cent (McDonald 1980).

Of all marriages performed in 1953-54, less than one per cent ended in divorce within the first five years, six per cent in the first 15 years, nine per cent in the first 20 years and 14 per cent in the first 25 years; of marriages entered into in 1963, 13.8 per cent were dissolved by 15 years (McDonald 1980).

Table 1: Marriages and Divorces in Australia 1969-1979

Year	No. of Divorces	No. of Marriages
1969	10 984	112 470
1970	12 247	116 066
1971	13 002	117 637
1972	15 707	114 029
1973	16 266	112 700
1974	17 744	110 673
1975	24 307	103 973
1976	63 267	109 973
1977	45 175	104 918
1978	40 633	102 958
1979	38 027	104 396

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Divorces Australia 1978*. Canberra, ABS, June 1980, *and* Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Marriages Australia 1979*. Canberra, ABS, October 1980.

Profiles of divorce statistics may become more meaningful when examined within the context of marriage and remarriage patterns. In the period 1960-1970, marriage became an almost universal phenomenon with less than five per cent of women and nine per cent of men remaining unmarried by age fifty, compared with approximately 30 per cent who never married in the period 1920-1930 and an average of 20 per cent in the 1940s. The crude marriage rate (i.e. marriage per 1000 population), however, has declined from 9.2 per cent in 1971 to 7.2 per cent in 1978 (Australia, Joint Select Committee on the Family Law Act, 1980). It is not surprising, then, given the high proportion of individuals marrying and the larger pool of marriages to draw from, that the incidence of divorce has also accelerated. As one observer has suggested, many individuals who marry lack the requisite skills to cope successfully with a marriage relationship (Hartin 1980).

Current marriage figures suggest subtle changes in marital trends that cannot be accurately evaluated until statistics for the next few years are analysed. For example, age at first marriage has steadily advanced since 1975 after having declined since the 1920s, and such trends are reflected in slightly higher proportions of never marrieds in various age

cohorts. Whether these individuals are just deferring marriage to a later age, or will never marry, remains to be determined and this cannot be identified as a trend or a fluctuation (Australia, Joint Select Committee on the Family Law Act, 1980). Additionally, an increase in the incidence and acceptance of de facto relationships among some social groups has been observed.

What is clear is the dramatic increase in numbers of remarriages occurring across all age groups. Of those divorcing under age 25 in 1968, 48 per cent of women and 41 per cent of men remarried within a year with almost 100 per cent remarrying within 6 years. Among the less youthful, 27 per cent of men and 19 per cent of women in their 50s remarry within a year of divorce (McDonald 1980).

The number of remarriages of divorced persons increased from 6 per cent in 1966-70 to 22 per cent in 1979. Out of all marriages performed in 1979, 31.6 per cent involved one or both partners who had been previously married including approximately three and a half per cent of widowed persons (ABS 1980c).

A summary of the various trends in marriage and divorce is presented in Table 2.

Approved Marriage Counselling Agencies

It is against this background of divorce and remarriage trends, that the provisions of the *Family Law Act* relative to marriage counselling attain some significance and relevance.

The Act states that 'where proceedings for a dissolution of marriage have been instituted, or financial or custodial proceedings instituted . . . it is the duty of the Judge or Magistrate . . . and every legal practitioner representing a party . . . to give consideration . . . to the possibility of a reconciliation of the parties.' (Australia, *Family Law Act*, 1975 S.14 (2)).

The Judge or Magistrate may advise the parties to attend a marriage counsellor or marriage counselling organisation and may adjourn any proceedings to allow the counselling to take place (Australia, *Family Law Act*, 1975 S.14 (5)). Clients

Table 2: Trends in marriage and divorce in Australia 1966-1979

	Marriages	Divorces	Median Age at Marriage (general pop.)			Median Age at Marriage (divorced pop.)		Median Age at Divorce (decree absolute)		Duration of Marriage (in years)	% Divorce in First 5 Years or Less of Marriage
				Groom	Bride	Groom	Bride	Groom	Bride		
1966	96 046	10 738	first	23.9	21.2	24.4	21.4	40.4	36.9	13.9	7.9
			all	24.2	21.5						
1971	117 637	13 002		23.4	21.1	23.7	21.0	37.9	34.4	12.5	9.3
				23.8	21.4						
1974	110 673	17 744		23.3	20.9	23.9	20.9	36.8	33.7	11.8	9.5
				23.8	21.4						
1975	103 973	24 307		23.4	21.0	23.3	20.8	36.3	33.4	11.6	9.9
				24.1	21.6						
1976	109 973	63 267		23.6	21.2	23.4	21.0	36.2	33.1	11.0	15.5
				24.9	22.2						
1978	102 958	40 633		23.9	21.4	23.3	20.8	35.7	32.7	10.5	19.3
				25.4	22.7						
				(Note Small Differences)							
1979	104 396	38 021		24.1	21.7	n.a.		n.a.		n.a.	n.a.
				25.6	22.9						

Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Australian demographic statistics quarterly December 1979 and March 1980.* Canberra, September 1980.
Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Marriages Australia 1979.* Canberra, October 1980.
Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Divorces Australia 1978.* Canberra, June 1980.
Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Divorces Australia 1976.* Canberra, November 1978.

may, however, choose to ignore the advice to seek counselling and there is no penalty attached to refusal.

Requests for dissolution of a marriage of less than two years duration will not be heard by the court unless the parties 'have considered a reconciliation with the assistance of a marriage counsellor, an approved marriage counselling organisation, or some other suitable person or organisation nominated by the Principal Director of Court Counselling . . .' (Australia, *Family Law Act*, 1975 S.14 (6) (a)).

Under the *Family Law Act*, the Commonwealth Government provides funding for marriage counselling organisations approved by the Attorney-General.

The relevant sections of the *Family Law Act* 1975 state:

'*Part II — Marriage Counselling Organisations*

11. The Attorney-General may, from time to time, out of moneys appropriated by the Parliament for the purposes of this Part, grant to an approved marriage counselling organisation, upon such conditions as he thinks fit, such sums by way of financial assistance as he determines.

12. (1) A voluntary organisation may apply to the Attorney-General for approval under this Part as a marriage counselling organisation.

(2) The Attorney-General may approve any such organisation as a marriage counselling organisation where he is satisfied that —

(a) the organisation is willing and able to engage in marriage counselling and

(b) marriage counselling constitutes or will constitute the whole or the major part of its activities.

13. (1) An approved marriage counselling organisation shall, not later than September 30 in each year, furnish to the Attorney-General, in respect of the period of 12 months that ended on June 30 in that year —

(a) an audited financial statement of the receipts and payments of the organisation, in which receipts and payments in respect of its marriage counselling activities are stored separately from other receipts and payments; and

(b) a report on its marriage counselling activities, including information as to the number of cases dealt with by the organisation during the year.'

The rationale for subsidisation is to foster mechanisms to 'buttress' the institution of marriage and provide the means 'available for assisting parties to a marriage to consider reconciliation or the improvement of their relationship to each other and to the children of the marriage' (Australia, *Family Law Act*, 1975 S.43(d)). This has been interpreted to mean pre-divorce counselling efforts to save a marriage as well as post-divorce counselling to encourage workable relationships between ex-spouses where children are involved. Under the provision of the *Marriage Act* some monies are also provided for pre-marital education programs.

Within the Attorney-General's Department, the Psychology and Counselling Section collects and analyses information about the counselling activities of approved marriage counselling agencies and has provided statistical summaries of these activities.

In 1980/81 the Commonwealth subsidised twenty-two marriage counselling organisations that operate 125 centres throughout Australia. To be approved, marriage counselling organisations must have a major orientation to relationship counselling between the partners with an emphasis on joint interviews. In 1980-81 a total of $2.8 million was provided to agencies under the Act compared with $1.28 million provided in 1975 to 92 centres. Pre-marriage education programs funded under the *Marriage Act* received $50,000 in 1980-81. Average subsidy per interview is estimated to be $20.52 (Attorney-General's Dept 1980). Approved agencies are equally divided among non-denominational voluntary organisations, such as the Marriage Guidance Councils in each of the States, and those affiliated with or operated by religious denominations such as the Church of England, Catholic Family Welfare Bureau, Uniting Church, and the Family Life Movement.

Counsellor Training

As well as a case of professionally trained staff, most of the approved counselling organisations rely on trained lay counsellors who volunteer on a part-time basis. Supervision and support is provided by a smaller salaried staff of psychologists, social workers and other consultants. Training programs are internally conducted by the majority of agencies for selected lay and professional people who wish to become accredited marriage counsellors. Basic courses are usually taken part-time (8-10 hours a week) and extended over 12-24 months. Approximately 300 hours of supervision counselling is also required. †

† (Figures abstracted from selected annual reports of approved marriage counselling organisations.)

Advanced training and staff development workshops are offered frequently by individual agencies or umbrella associations to improve skills in specialist areas.

Recommended general areas of course work focus on psychological and counselling theories, Australian family sociology, marriage and family theories and processes, sexual functioning, assessment diagnosis, and intervention theories (National Marriage Guidance Council of Australia 1980).

In some areas recruitment of counsellors as staff and for training is a serious problem. For example, the Marriage Guidance Council of Northern Territory reported that they were unable to set up their own training program in Darwin and are reliant on Darwin Community College counselling graduates who have not indicated any interest this past year (Marriage Guidance Council of Northern Territory, 1980).

The effectiveness of lay versus academically trained counsellors is periodically debated with many organisations strongly committed to the diversity of expertise brought to the counselling dynamic by committed individuals from varying backgrounds. The use of volunteer counsellors appears to be a financial necessity for most organisations if fee scales are to be kept at a free or affordable level to clients. Even with government subsidy, some organisations charge fees of five to ten dollars a session which may inhibit couples from seeking or continuing counselling (Harvey, 1979c, Purcell 1980).

Systems based on volunteers, however, usually rely on middle class counsellors who can afford to volunteer time. Counsellors who may have greater rapport with lower income groups and who come from similar backgrounds may be unable to work voluntarily. It has been noted that as counsellors become more highly trained, they may choose to work in private practices or for agencies charging higher fees so that lower income groups who could most benefit from skilled counsellors lose the benefit (Australian Association of Marriage and Family Counsellors 1980).

Availability of Approved Services

Figures from the Attorney-General's Department estimate that approximately 74 per cent of the Australian population has reasonable access to approved agencies with 84 per cent of the urban population in reasonable geographic proximity to services. Rural residents, especially that 12 per cent of the population living in towns of less than 200 population, have limited access to approved centres. Towns with populations of 10 000 or less (14 per cent) may lack an approved agency, but many of these areas have access to nearby centres or have services provided by non-approved organisations. Pilot centres have been established in some rural areas by Marriage Guidance Councils only to cease functioning because of lack of funds, difficulty with counsellor recruitment, few clients, slight interest or competing community needs (Harvey 1979c).

Another opinion on the availability of services in rural areas was expressed at public meetings sponsored by the Early Childhood Development Program (ECDP) of the Health Commission of Victoria in Numurkah, Nathalia, and Kyabram in 1980. The meetings were held to review the needs of families with young children. Speakers at these meetings — medical officers, infant welfare sisters, welfare officers, and pre-school directresses — raised the issue of inadequate access to marriage counselling services with waits of three to five weeks for appointments in the town of Shepparton, 30 minutes drive away from these areas. Although this distance is considered reasonable by the Attorney-General's Department, welfare officers noted that there is no evening public transport from these areas to Shepparton (F. Purcell, ECDP Shepparton, pers. comm., Oct. 1980).

Throughout Australia in 1979-80 approved agencies handled a total of 29 481 cases comprising 112 438 interviews. This represented an increase of 50 per cent in cases and 32 per cent in interviews since 1974-75 (Attorney-General's Department 1980).

Table 3 indicates the increase in marriage counselling contacts during the past 20 years.

Other Counselling Services

These statistics, however, represent only a part of the total status of marriage counselling activities in Australia, covering only the formal approved counselling organisations. Many troubled couples and individuals turn to less formal services for advice and assistance. Neighbours, relatives, and friends are likely to be the first informal source of support (Krupinski & Stoller 1971). For others, their clergyman is a source of emotional support and practical assistance.

Physicians are most frequently cited in the literature as the first professional source to be approached with marriage and family problems (McCaughey and others 1977, Wood 1979, Health Commission of NSW 1979). General practitioners report that patients, in many cases, present with marital distress disguised as a medical problem. Forms of depression

Table 3:
Number of cases and interviews conducted by approved marriage guidance and counselling agencies in Australia 1960- 1979.

	1960-61	1965-66	1972-73	1975-76	1977-78	1978-79	1979-80
CASES							
marriage counselling	4854	8442	16 015	20 472	25 319	31 471	29 481
pre-marital	517	1059	1423	1556	1937		
Total Caseload	5371	9611	17 448	22 028	27 256	31 471	29 481
INTERVIEWS							
joint	1352	4052	18 216	26 188	32 527	36 538	38 983
wife alone	6001	15 228	28 050	34 391	43 996	44 682	45 829
husband alone	3971	9382	15 951	19 945	22 456	21 888	21 631
pre-marital*	1257	2923	4002	7245	9596	n.a.	n.a.
Combined Interviews	14 825	32 439	64 896	90 378	112 030	111 169	112 438

* from 1978 onwards, this figure is counted in with all other marital interviews

and anxiety linked to disturbed interpersonal relationships are among the most common illnesses seen (Langsley 1979, Harvey 1979c, Pahl 1979). In 1979 the health and social survey of the North West region of Melbourne (Krupinski and MacKenzie 1979) documented that 85 per cent of those interviewed who sought help for nerves (in which the underlying cause was often related to marital dysfunction) went to a general practitioner. A recent survey concluded that a majority of physicians now regard marital counselling as a dimension of their practice (Maddison 1978).

Social workers, community welfare nurses, and infant welfare sisters attached to Community Health Centres and Infant Welfare Centres state that a substantial percentage of their clients have marital and family problems that either emerge during the course of working with clients on their problems or are disclosed directly (Department of Community Welfare, South Australia, personal communication, June 1980).

Although evidence exists that clients approach Community Health Centres and other community welfare agencies with marital problems, there is not a central clearinghouse that collects or analyses this data in an easily obtainable form. While individual health and social welfare centres do compile these statistics, neither the Health Commission nor the Departments of Community Welfare in Victoria or South Australia, for example, require Community Health Centres or other agencies to collect or forward statistics on the number of clients presenting with marital problems or referred to marriage counselling services. One social welfare agency, Doncare, in Doncaster, Victoria, reported recently that 80 per cent of their work is marriage and family counselling (*Age* 15 October 1980).

A glance through the Yellow Pages of the telephone books in each State under the heading Marriage Counselling discloses additional resources — lists of private psychologists and psychiatrists and organisations involved in a variety of human relations and family therapy activities.

The role of lawyers as marriage counsellors should not be discounted either since individuals may turn to a lawyer when contemplating the feasibility and consequences of a possible divorce.

The *Family Law Act* itself provides for the appointment of Court Counsellors. The counsellors, usually social workers or psychologists, are staff members of the Family Courts and are mainly involved in disputes over access and custody of children. Their role is to assist the couple either pre- or post divorce to arrive at a realistic resolution of their situation so the children will make the best adjustment. Judges, however, may call upon the counsellors if there is a reasonable likelihood for reconciliation between disputants. A small survey of lawyers in Western Australia concluded that 49 per cent of their clients had reconciled as a result of Court counselling processes (Bowen, D'Cruz and Hawkins 1980). Court counsellors are attempting to develop liaisons with lawyers to encourage them to refer clients for counselling prior to pursuing legal action in the Courts.

Because the counsellors have too much work just dealing with custody and access cases, almost all requests for marriage counselling outside these issues are referred to the approved marriage counselling agencies (Asche & Marshall 1980). In 1979-80 a total of 513 referrals were made by the Family Court of Australia to the approved organisations. Of these referrals, 320 were made specifically by Family Court Counsellors. Of all referrals, 260 were made to Marriage

Guidance Councils, 157 to Catholic Family Welfare Bureaux and 96 to the other approved organisations. Counsellors themselves agree that the distinction between custody and access conciliation processes and marriage counselling is sometimes artificial since so many issues raised are an extension of continuing marital conflict (Family Court of Australia 1979).

Annual statistics are compiled for all approved marriage counselling agencies by the Psychology and Counselling Section of the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department. Limited staffing and other resources has not allowed the Section to analyse this data in any depth. Currently, efforts are being made to standardise the statistics collected.

Client Characteristics

The profile of the average client seeking marriage counselling from an approved agency has been described as: an Australian born couple living in the metropolitan area who married when they were between 20-24 years, have been married less than ten years and have not more than two children (National Marriage Guidance Council of Australia 1978).

About one fifth of clients seen by Marriage Guidance Councils have been married previously. One fifth have no children and of the 80 per cent with children, half had children under age seven and five per cent had all grown children. This can be compared with figures from all marital dissolutions in 1978 where 37 per cent of couples had no children and a total of 51 599 children under 18 were involved in divorce (ABS 1978).

Most couples (50%) sought counselling too late — when the marriage had deteriorated to a stage where reconciliation was unlikely. Over 30 per cent of clients were already living apart at the time when counselling was initiated. The majority of couples had been married under 10 years with 28 per cent of clients presenting in the first four years. In 1978, 19 per cent of divorces were granted to couples married less than five years (ABS 1980b).

A NSW Marriage Guidance Council study observed that the number of clients who had been previously married had increased. In many instances, it was noted, these clients approached counselling before remarriage had taken place or earlier in the breakdown of the new relationship. Twelve per cent of these couples were living in a de-facto relationship. Difficulties and adjustments with children are a major factor in these situations where blended families can and do create complex family dynamics (Wiederkehr 1980).

Although parenting/step-parenting relationships are a growing consideration in the counselling of previously married partners, family therapy as such is not funded by the Attorney-General's Department, and most marriage counsellors still focus on the marital or relationship dyad as the most appropriate intervention point for marriage counselling.

A review of the annual reports of the approved agencies, however, reveals that most conduct a variety of marriage enrichment and education workshops outside of the funded marriage counselling activity itself. How well marriage counselling organisations serve the migrant communities and couples from lower socio-economic groups is difficult to ascertain since data is not available in a format which is easy to analyse. According to Marriage Guidance Council reports, the majority of their clients (and counsellors) are middle class and of Australian or British migrant origin. Annual statistics for 1979 compiled by the Attorney-General's Department show that only 7.2 per cent of approved agency clients had difficulty speaking English.

Agencies that assist migrants indicate that they frequently refer their clients to the local branch of a country of origin association such as Yugoslav Welfare (Migrant Resource Centre, pers. comm., 1980) Several marriage counselling agencies have interpreters or counsellors fluent in particular languages and clients are referred to these where possible. That such services are necessary can be supposed from the statistics on divorces granted in 1978. In that year, of the 14 609 overseas born husbands and wives granted a divorce, 5131 husbands and 4116 wives had been born in non-English speaking countries (ABS 1980b). Approximately 50.5 per cent of overseas born brides and grooms who were married in Australia in 1979 were from non-English speaking countries. In the same year 67 per cent of all marriages performed were to couples where both partners were Australian born (ABS 1980c). If one is looking to the future, a certain proportion of these marriages are likely to end in divorce, thus requiring the use of bilingual counsellors or interpreters.

Clients with limited educational background and unskilled jobs do not appear to seek out traditional marriage counselling agencies with the exception of some church related welfare organisations. As discussed earlier, many working class couples may prefer to bring sensitive personal problems to their clergy, family physician or local social welfare/health centre where marital problems emerge from other concerns.

Some research suggests that lower income/education couples do not respond as readily to counselling based on middle class values and attitudes towards sharing of family responsibilities, male and female roles, or the companionship model of marriage (COPE 1978).

Clients' Presenting Problems

Client problems clustered around three areas — lack of communication, sexual dissatisfaction and disenchanted wife issues (National Marriage Guidance Council of Australia 1978). Communication problems covered a broad area of concerns — an inability to define personal goals, difficulty exploring changing values and attitudes, conflict and violence, and an absence of basic communication skills such as listening. Sexual dissatisfaction as an increasing determinant of marital unhappiness has been attributed to changing morality patterns, greater sexual freedom, especially for women, and raised expectations on the part of both sexes which have generated an unwillingness to tolerate dissatisfaction in marriage. The disenchanted wife syndrome is tied to current changes in women's roles and their expectations of marriage (Craddock 1980).

Weaving in and out of the literature on causes of marital breakdown is the theme of changing roles and attitudes of women that challenge the traditional image of marriage and family. Corollaries to this feminist concept are that women are becoming less dependent on marriage, especially an unsatisfactory marriage and that men are having difficulties adapting to the new 'equalitarianism' (Craddock 1980).

Clients whose problems have been analysed come mainly from the middle class with only 0.1 per cent of clients in the unskilled category. It may be important to keep in mind that middle class clients are more likely to have options available, both personal and financial, enabling them to pursue desired alternative lifestyles to their current marital status. Religious and social welfare organisations report seeing clients from a wider social economic spectrum, who present with more problems related to lack of finances and child/parent conflicts (Catholic Family Welfare Bureau 1979).

Conflicts over money, on the other hand, may be overlooked by counsellors more involved with the emotional factors of divorce and who do not stress the more practical aspects of the presenting problems (Kressel 1980). Thus the clients of official marriage counselling organisations may not be typical of those in the wider community suffering from marital distress.

Evaluation

Evaluation and analysis of the marriage counselling process is hampered by the difficulties of assessing the effects of the various therapeutic intervention techniques used by the counsellors and by the possible bias in counsellor/client interpretation of the success or failure of the process. Little follow up occurs after a couple leaves counselling. A few small studies have been conducted to look at clients' perception of their marriage after counselling, but concerns about possible invasion of privacy have inhibited the undertaking of major research in this area.

The annual statistics collected by the Attorney-General's Department for 1977-78 reported the following outcomes of counselling:

Cases Continuing No Improvement	1284
Cases Continuing Improved	3041
New Cases Resolved	5830
Improved	6745
No Improvement	2623
Unknown	4413

Counsellors perceptions indicated that problems were either improved or resolved in 64.1 per cent of cases and in 35 per cent of cases outcome was unknown or no improvement took place. In 1979-80, counsellors rated 66.7 per cent of cases with positive results whereas clients indicated a positive outcome in 77.6 per cent of cases. This latter figure is based on replies to a questionnaire with a 60 per cent response rate. Client satisfaction was not recorded during previous years (Attorney-General's Department 1980).

Assessing counselling outcomes objectively poses great difficulty. Several pilot studies have suggested that counsellor attitudes and values regarding sex role expectations and stereotyping may influence the perception of problems presented and the reported satisfaction with counselling outcome for both clients and counsellors (Marriage Guidance Council of NSW 1978).

One study done by Eckersley and Garrow (1976) on clients of the Marriage Guidance Council of Victoria, concluded that at four to six months after counselling termination, 70 per cent of clients felt they had been helped. Clients indicated that counselling had improved their ability to communicate, handle arguments, and be more aware of themselves and accepting of each other. Least improvement was achieved in the area of sexual relationships. Outcome was highly correlated with the state of conflict in the marriage at the initiation of counselling. Where clients had decided to separate

or were already separated little improvement resulted in the relationship. External influences, often ignored as variables in such outcome of counselling studies, were responsible for changes in 57.5 per cent of clients who mentioned the intervention of doctors, lawyers, friends and life situations such as a job change, or birth of baby, as generally positive factors contributing to improvement.

Another study done by the National Marriage Guidance Council of Australia in 1977 reinforced that the most critical factor in determining outcome was the state of the marriage at the time counselling was initiated. As stated earlier, over 30 per cent of clients were already living apart when they sought assistance.

Not unexpectedly, successful resolution of marital conflict was related to the extent of positive motivation to change the situation. Positive results (and these were not defined) were obtained where husband and wife participated in joint interviews.

Satisfactory outcome was also related to the couples'/partner's ability to accept the idea of helping themselves with the assistance of the counsellor. Least successful outcomes were achieved when couples/partners expected the counsellor to provide the answers. According to the study, 50 per cent of the wives had this mature approach to counselling while more of the husbands had unrealistic expectations and relied on the counsellor. Again the impact of different sex role expectations and perceptions of both the clients and counsellors may be important to the counselling dynamic.

Trends

General trends in marriage counselling have been identified from reviewing the literature from the data collected by the Psychology and Counselling Section of the Attorney-General's Department and from interviews with staff of social welfare agencies. Briefly summarised these trends are:

1) The number of legally married *and* de-facto couples seeking marriage counselling is increasing;
2) Most couples enter counselling when marital breakdown reaches a crisis stage and reconciliation is less likely;
3) Counselling is most successful when both partners are involved in joint interviewing sessions;
4) Lack of communication between partners is the primary presenting problem;
5) Marital breakdown is occurring earlier in marriage, that is within the first five years of marriage;
6) Changing roles and expectations of women are a major contributing factor in marital unrest;
7) The number of couples in which one or both partners has been previously married is increasing; and
8) Blended family dynamics are a major cause of marital stress for previously married couples.

Research Gaps

Enormous gaps in data exist on many aspects of marriage counselling in Australia. Although individual approved agencies collect statistics on the socio-economic status of their clients — education, occupation, previous marriages, age of children and personality characteristics — the new Statistical Return form required by the Attorney-General's Department does not request or analyse such sociological or demographic data. The Psychology and Counselling Section of the Department states that it does not have the mandate or the staff resources to do anything but monitor the activities of the approved agencies specifically in terms of precise data on their efficiency of operation. Information analysed is limited to recording the number of cases, clients, kinds of interviews, referral sources, and outcome rating.

Considerable additional information, however, is being collected on counsellor and especially client perception of counselling outcomes with new forms devised in 1980 by the Attorney-General's Department. These evaluation data will provide much needed information on whether the client saw counselling as a positive or negative experience, whether the clients were enabled to separate satisfactorily or unsatisfactorily or chose to make no change, and whether either of the partners benefitted personally or not. Unfortunately, because sparse socio-economic data is being collected, there will be little opportunity to relate reported outcomes to education, occupation or family background, and other social status indicators. No distinction is made either between legally married couples and couples in a de-facto relationship which would give much needed data on such issues.

Evaluation of marriage counselling effectiveness is hampered by an inability to account for the many different methods or techniques employed by counsellors with varied personalities and training (Harvey 1979b). Successful outcome must therefore also be defined, because separation, as well as reconciliation, may be positive in some cases.

Currently, the only comments that can be made on outcome are evaluations based on the clients' and counsellors' perceptions at the time of termination of counselling. Few Austral-

ian follow-up studies exist on what has happened to couples subsequent to counselling. Questions of invasion of privacy are cited as one reason for not initiating such studies (Huppert 1975). Without longitudinal research on outcomes, it is not possible to determine which strategies should be continued and where innovations should be encouraged.

Since so many clients appear to approach counselling too late in the stage of marital breakdown to be reconciled, measures to promote immunization against future marriage breakdown should be investigated. Pre-marriage counselling, marriage enrichment programs, and courses under the rubric of human relations/family life education all seek to provide individuals and couples with the preventive medicine to forestall marriage distress. A review of these programs and issues will be the subject of a separate discussion paper.

The literature suggests that, in many instances, people in marital distress may be helped more by social welfare measures than counselling *per se*. Couples may need support for stresses of family life related to housing conditions, medical problems, financial need and child care that exacerbate or precipitate strains in marital relationships and diminish the coping mechanisms of many couples (McCaughey and others 1977).

Locating marriage counsellors within social welfare, health centres, or even occupational settings, may be a more useful method of reaching a broader spectrum of people who would benefit from marriage counselling. Training helping professions to be aware of marital distress symptoms in their clients and to refer them to counselling may also be useful (Harvey 1979c). The media as a resource to promote marriage counselling (perhaps marriage checkups like dentist visits) as an acceptable activity has been overlooked. An innovative concept would be to use a marriage counselling theme in a popular TV series, for example.

Research Recommendations

Further research and evaluation in the following areas of marriage counselling is suggested to fill in the obvious gaps in information. Organisations such as the Australian Association of Marriage and Family Counsellors, the Association of Marriage Counselling Organisations, or the Psychology and Counselling Section of the Attorney-General's Department could be possible resources for such studies as:

1) Availability, accessibility and acceptability of services to migrant and working class populations;
2) Marriage counselling outcomes three, five, ten years after counselling termination;
3) A survey of non-approved marriage counselling organisations;
4) Collection and analysis of data on socio-economic status of marriage counselling clients;
5) Relationship of marriage breakdown to general lack of interpersonal competencies, coping abilities of partners;
6) Relationship of marriage breakdown to need for social welfare supports;
7) A survey of innovative marriage counselling programs in Australia; and
8) Remarriage and blended family marriage counselling issues.

Some of these research initiatives may be undertaken or supported by the Institute of Family Studies, but it is imperative that the marriage counselling organisations themselves develop better methods for collecting data on the effectiveness of their methods and the long term outcomes.

Conclusion

Inter-relationships between marriage counselling, marriage enrichment, pre-marital education and family therapy need further elaboration. Their relationship to social welfare supports as a positive influence in marital equilibrium also should be explored. Couples in marital distress do not have a single identifiable marriage problem, but a constellation of concerns, responses and reactions that take place and are acted out in the broader social and environmental arena.

Even a brief review of marriage counselling services and issues in Australia indicates that counselling is a resource for many troubled couples and individuals. How well such services meet the needs of clients, or identify unmet needs in the community, requires further research. Definitions of satisfactory intervention and outcome must also be established if services are to be accurately evaluated.

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